Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

POVERTY BAROMETER

March 2005

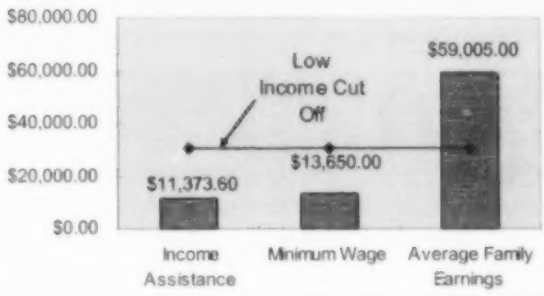
Food Security and Nutrition:

Too many families can't afford the food they need to be healthy

Good nutrition is essential for a child's health and development, yet for families living in poverty, nutrition is often compromised due to the limited accessibility and affordability of healthy foods, or food insecurity.

Employment and Income assistance (EIA) rates and the minimum wage fall dramatically short of the real cost of living, leaving many families struggling below the poverty line without adequate income to provide for all their needs. The graph to the right shows how far below the poverty line these incomes actually are.

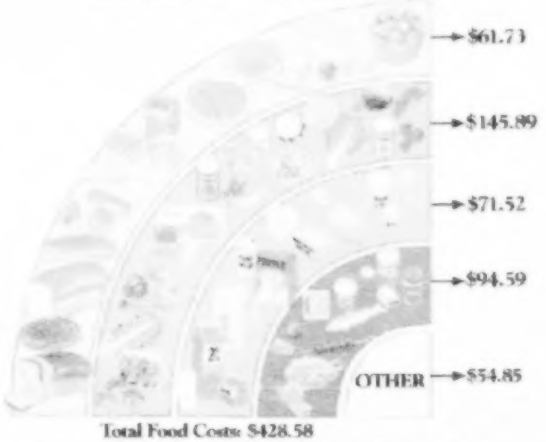
Graph 1: Low Income Gap, Family of Three*



The Cost of Healthy Eating: Recommended vs. Reality

The 2003 Acceptable Living Level (A.L.L.) Report** recommends that a one parent family with two children should spend $428.58/month on food to meet their nutritional requirements as per the Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. The breakdown of the A.L.L.'s monthly food expenditures is outlined in the "rainbow " diagram below.

Monthly Recommended Food Expenditures
One Parent Family Two Children



Total Food Costs: $428.58

Table 1 shows how far a family falls behind trying to meet these recommended food expenditures.

Table 1: Income Deficit for Family of Three

	Income Assistance (EIA)	Minimum Wage
Cost of Food	$428.58	$428.58
Shelter	$724.00	$724.00
Clothing	$132.36	$132.36
Other Living Expenses	$1,504.34	$1,504.34
Monthly Net Income	$947.80	$1,137.50
National Child Benefit	440.58	$440.58
GST Tax Credit	$36.67	$36.67
Manitoba CRISP	$0.00	$60.00
Total Income	$1,435.26	$1,684.96
Total Expenses	$2,789.28	$2,789.28
INCOME DEFICIT	**- $1,354.02**	**-$1,104.32**

There is a large gap between actual costs of living and EIA and the minimum wage. EIA gives a family of three $430 for rent when the actual cost is $722. To pay their rent, families must cut into their already limited food budget. This means they cannot access the food they need to be healthy.

Source: Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, Health Canada, (2002). Adapted and Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2005.

*Average family earnings for City of Winnipeg. Minimum wage at $7.00/hr and EIA rates (benefit and shelter) for one parent with two children.

**2003 A.L.L. Report prepared by Winnipeg Harvest and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

'PAY THE RENT OR FEED THE KIDS': How do Families Cope with Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity is not only about hunger. Food insecurity exists when there is a lack of access to safe, affordable, and adequate nutritious food. People who live in poverty are not only at an increased risk of hunger, they also commonly experience inadequate, poor quality food intakes. The food budget is the most flexible as it is not fixed like shelter, child care, and transportation are. As a result, when families are faced with competing costs, it is the most vulnerable to being cut. In order for their children to participate in recreational activities and programs, which are essential for healthy development, parents have little choice but to reduce the quantity, quality and variety of foods they consume and *rely* on emergency food sources such as food banks. 'Pay the rent or feed the kids' refers to this impossible situation that poverty creates for families, which has significant consequences for their health and nutritional status.

The Paradox of Food Insecurity

We tend to associate food insecurity with having too little and obesity with having too much, particularly in Western countries. One of the consequences of poverty and food insecurity is obesity. One of the most perplexing paradoxes is the strong connection between the two.

Research has shown that the lack of safe and nutritionally adequate foods leads to obesity and other related health risks and that obesity rates are highest among groups with the highest poverty rates.[1] The *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* found that as family income increases, the proportion of overweight children decreases.[2] Studies have also shown that women living in food insecure households are 30-36% more likely to be obese.[3]

As the "rainbow" on the first page shows, the greatest cost among the food groups is that of vegetables and fruits—the one most likely to be low in intake for many Canadians.

Often in food insecure households, parents or caregivers sacrifice their own diet so their children can eat. According to the 2001 National Population Health Survey, one third of all female one parent families were food insecure to some extent and 28% reported cutting back on food quality or quantity.[4]

The nutritional quality of diets is often compromised in food insecure households by the consumption of large portions of low cost "energy dense" foods. The term "energy-dense" may be misleading, as it can refer to foods that are rich in calories and nutrients. Poor quality energy dense foods, however, provide an excess of empty calories that get stored in the body as fat and leave a feeling of sluggishness and lethargy. These foods do not provide adequate nutrients, especially for growing children.[3]

Energy dense foods are appealing for many reasons. They can be appetizing, help maintain energy intake and leave a feeling of fullness. These foods are often the least expensive to buy,[1] offer convenience and are readily available in grocery stores, restaurants, and vending machines. All of these are important considerations for families struggling below the poverty line.

When taken in moderation, energy dense foods can be considered healthy. It is when they are relied on as basic everyday staples that an imbalance occurs and nutrition is jeopardized. Unfortunately, this is the reality for far too many families.

Examples of Nutrient Poor Foods

Chocolate bars	Potato chips
Candy	Cookies
Pastries	Regular pasta
White bread	Pizza
White rice	Noodles
Fruit juices/drinks	Soft drinks

Deep fried chicken

Examples of Nutrient Rich Foods

Milk	Yogurt
Cheese	Whole grains
Soy products	Broccoli
Almonds/Nuts	Fruit
Legumes	Meat/Fish

Leafy green vegetables

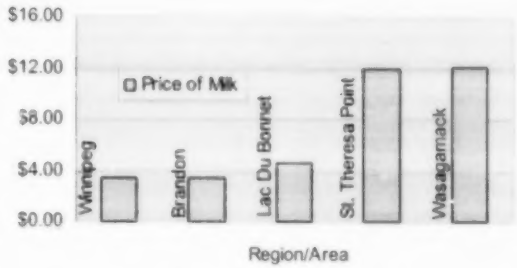
What are the Nutritional Effects of Food Insecurity?

Dairy, vegetables, fruits, grains, and fresh meats contain a variety of nutrients and are important sources of vitamins, fiber, minerals, iron, calcium, and quality protein. Given their higher cost, fewer of these healthy foods can be purchased by families living in poverty. They are also not as available at food banks. Even when a family can obtain them, they require extra preparation and storage, which are added concerns in food insecure households.

Studies show that calcium intakes in children are low and have been decreasing in recent years due to a decrease in milk consumption. Income has a direct impact on calcium intake. One study found that inner city school children were at a greater risk of low calcium and vitamin D intakes because they had limited access to a variety of foods and often went without breakfast.[5]

The cost of milk has been shown to vary within Winnipeg, costing more in the inner city than in suburban areas.[6] The graph to the right shows the variation in the cost of milk across Manitoba. Winnipeg Harvest reports that it costs $20 per month to provide one child in Winnipeg with three glasses of milk daily and can triple to $60 in most northern communities.

Graph 2: Regional Differences in Price of 4L Milk



Source: 2003 A.L.L. Report. Winnipeg Harvest and Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

Iron is another important mineral that can be deficient in diets of food insecure families. Iron deficiency anemia has had a higher rate of occurrence in Aboriginal infants as young as 6 months! Breast feeding better protects infants against iron deficiency. [7]

References:

[1] Drewnoski, A., Specter, S.E. (2004). Poverty and obesity: the role of energy density and energy costs. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 79(1), 6-16.

[2] *Healthy Hearts and Healthy Communities: How Health Promotion helps us think differently about cardiovascular disease*. November 15, 2004. Prepared for the Canadian Health Network by the CHN Health Promotion Affiliate.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN FOOD SECURITY

Different immigrant groups in Canada face additional barriers to nutrition and food security. Many consume healthy diets before coming to Canada; however their eating habits change once they arrive. A study found that recent immigrants were at greater risk for food insecurity than people who had been born here or who had immigrated more than ten years prior. It found that recent immigrants ate less than two meals per day; ate fewer vegetables, fruits, and dairy products, and had unplanned weight changes.[4]

Food is more than a basic source of nutrients; it is also a key component of our culture, central to our sense of identity".
- Koc and Welsh (2002)

Availability, freshness and affordability of food play a role in access to healthy and culturally acceptable foods. Limited availability of food consumed in traditional diets affects food security for newcomers. Many immigrants do not live close to a store where they can purchase familiar foods. According to the 2001 Census, 36% of immigrants to Winnipeg live in the inner city where access to large chain grocery stores that offer competitive pricing and a variety of ethnic foods is limited. Many immigrants are unfamiliar with Western foods, such as frozen foods and may prefer fresh fruits and vegetables and freshly caught fish, all of which are more expensive.[8] Poverty among immigrants is another important consideration. The Social Planning Council's 2004 Manitoba Child Poverty Report Card found that over half (51.2%) of all recent immigrant children in Manitoba live in poverty.

Aboriginal populations also face many barriers to healthy eating. Loss of both traditional eating habits and lifestyle plus the limited availability of traditional foods make good food choices difficult. Transporting milk and other perishables to isolated communities is prohibitively expensive and difficult. Seasonal variations and weather conditions can adversely affect air and land transport.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR FOOD SECURITY: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

Income has a clear effect on diet quality, dietary habits, and food choices[1], which in turn, has a direct impact on the health, growth, and development of children. Everyone in Canada is entitled to food security, yet families with children living in poverty often go without. These families, due to limited income, have little choice but to depend on lesser quality, low cost foods. To ensure the right to food security and good nutrition, the following recommendations are essential.

What Can Individuals Do?

- **Take the challenge**. The A.L.L. Budget allocates 15% of the case family's total income towards food to meet their nutrition requirements. As a percentage of the EIA benefit, a family of three would live on $54/week for food or $8/day. Try to feed just yourself healthy food options for a week on $3/day. Send in the attached postcard to Manitoba's politicians. Visit www.spcw.mb.ca for more options and ideas.
- **Give wisely**. When donating to Winnipeg Harvest or other food banks, remember that your donation is going to a growing child. Consider what you would feed your children.
- **Ask questions**. Be informed of where your elected officials stand on the issues. Learn about how your community is responding to food insecurity and poverty.

What Can Communities Do?

- Work together in coalitions to advocate for policies to reduce poverty; to promote availability of nutritious food through community based food programs in schools, child care centres, and summer programs.
- Work with stakeholders to ensure that all recreational facilities and schools provide healthy food options in canteens and vending machines.

What Can Governments Do?

- Increase the minimum wage to a living wage of $10/hour and index it to some measure to ensure its purchasing power is maintained over time.
- Increase and index Employment and Income Assistance benefits and shelter allowances to reflect actual costs of living for recipients.
- Increase the Child Related Income Supplement Program (CRISP) benefit and expand eligibility to families on income assistance and moderate low income earners.
- Support the creation of good jobs with good wages including support for living wage ordinances and for community economic development initiatives.
- Improve access to education and training as a means of addressing long term poverty.
- Commit to create 1000 more affordable and low income housing units each year in Manitoba.
- Immediately eliminate the $2.40 per child/day surcharge for child care.
- Work with communities to promote the availability of nutritious foods in schools, universities, hospitals, workplaces, recreation and community sites and investigate and implement strategies to support local food provision and self-sufficiency.

References:

[3] Adams, E.J., Grummer-Strawn, L., Chavez, G. (2003). Food insecurity is associated with increased risk of obesity in California women. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 133, 1070-1074.

[4] Koc, Mustafa and Welsh, Jennifer (2002). Food, Foodways, and Immigrant Experience. Centre for Studies in Food Security. Ryerson University, Toronto.

[5] Ransome, K., Rusk, J., Yurkiw, M., Field, C. (1998). A school milk promotion program increases milk consumption and improves calcium and vitamin D intakes of elementary school students. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 59(4), 190-199.

[6] Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (March 2002). March is Nutrition Month: Can Manitoba Families Afford the Food their Children Need? *Poverty Barometer*.

[7] Willows, N.D., Dewailly, E., Gray-Donald, K. (2000). Anemia and iron status in Inuit infants in northern Quebec. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*,91(6), 407-410.

[8] Hyman, I., Guruge, S., Makarchuk, M.J., Cameron, J., Micevski, V. (2002). Promotion of healthy eating among new immigrant women in Ontario. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 63(3), 125-129.

Poverty Barometer is an occasional publication of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

The mission of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg is to provide action-oriented leadership in social planning and effecting social policy changes.

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